

Alert

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The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union Retained Members ❖ www.fbu.org.uk

Spring 2009



'The FBU has been great'

**Sedgley's Mark Walker
on transferring to wholetime**

Editorial



This is our first *Alerter* magazine of the year, and 2009 looks like being a busy year for retained issues in light of the part-time workers legal victory back in March of last year. Discussions are ongoing to find a solution to the complex issue of retained duty system (RDS) firefighters being excluded from the Firefighters Pension Scheme and access to sick pay. Discussion has taken place between the Fire Brigades Union and the National Fire Service Employers at Joint Secretary level in order to achieve a negotiated settlement.

In the interim both sides' legal representatives will be reminding the Tribunal of the schedule of National Joint Council (NJC) meeting dates and seek agreement to a revised extension date of the end of March in order to provide for conclusion of this matter at the National Joint Council meeting in March.

The retained members' AGM took place on 30 November in the Kingston Lodge in London. This was the first year

Delegates, officials and observers all enthusiastically supported the new procedure which resulted in resolutions being vigorously debated

using the new AGM process and the 39 delegates, officials and observers all enthusiastically supported the new procedure which resulted

in resolutions being vigorously debated. Three were selected by the National Retained Committee to go forward to FBU Annual Conference 2009.

The end of the UK opt-out on the Working Time Directive (WTD) on the 48 hour week has been presented in the media recently as an attack on the retained duty system and retained firefighters. But the difficulties have been wildly exaggerated. This is about stopping an excessive hours culture that is bad for the health and safety of all workers. And that's why the FBU – along with other TUC-affiliated unions in the UK – support the change.

Recent surveys* show that relatively few retained firefighters will be affected. And this can potentially be managed by minor adjustments. Fire authorities could assist in managing any transition by ensuring they have the correct number of wholetime and retained firefighters in their establishment rather than operating with built-in shortages of firefighters.

See the latest *Firefighter* magazine or your local official for more information.

*ONS Labour Force Survey Microdata Service, Summer 2008; LFS Microdata Service, Summer 2008



AGM 2008

Transferability and retaining fees top bill

Strategies for bolstering retaining fees, promoting a fairer, more transparent system of transferability from retained to wholetime duty systems and raising the profile of retained firefighters and the work they do for their communities are to be taken forward for debate at the Union's Annual Conference in May, delegates of FBU retained firefighters agreed at the National Retained Committee's Annual General Meeting (AGM) on 30 November. As well as these issues, the meeting also discussed how to tackle problems with trade union leave and the need for improved email resources for reps.

The 2008 AGM, held in Kingston Upon Thames, Surrey, was the first organised by the NRC, which under changes to the FBU's "standing orders" will also be responsible for all future AGMs.

Executive Council Member Tam Mitchell outlined the work of the NRC over the course of the previous year in



PICTURES: STEFANO CAGNONI



high priority areas such as pensions and on behalf of those members who wished to transfer to full time duty system posts within their own and other brigades.

The 39 delegates, officials and observers from across the UK also heard from FBU President Mick Shaw on key Union campaigns such as firefighters fatalities, pensions and the recruitment of new members. FBU Organiser Daniel Giblin provided further details on the Union's organising activity, including the Activist's Academy course that has been trialled in Humberside recently.

Questions were taken and answered on workforce development, training and transferability, among other themes.

New attendees to the AGM went away with the message that membership involvement in discussing, developing and helping implement strategies to deal with these and many other issues affecting RDS members was essential, and that the FBU had the structures in place – including regularly held branch, brigade and regional retained meetings – to facilitate this.



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COVER PICTURE: ROY PETERS

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CAMPAIGN NEWS

In short

◆ As *Alerter* went to press, the Union slammed a new multi-million pound plan for York's fire services for wasting money and failing to solve the underlying problems of recruiting and keeping firefighters working on the retained duty system. The Union says the plan, which involves recruiting students to work as retained firefighters at a new fire station to the south of the City near the University is unrealistic. The students could not be available during lengthy university holidays and there would be concerns about their reliability and availability during term-time.



◆ Local campaign group, SOFAR (Save Our Fire and Rescue), is continuing to put pressure on councillors to re-open Radlett Fire Station in Tory-controlled Hertfordshire.

In a letter sent in January to County Councillor Robert Gordon, Leader of the Conservative Group on Hertfordshire County Council, it accuses the council of failing to carry out a commitment to review the impact of the decision to close the retained station within two years, "despite clear statistical evidence that the impact of the decision has been adverse to the community and has had a particularly severe impact on the high risk area of Borehamwood which traditionally has been supported primarily by the Radlett crew."

◆ The Union is preparing a report on the way that training, development and access to promotion is being applied across the UK fire service to retained and wholetime firefighters. Information is being collated from FBU brigade officials and will be examined by a team of head office officials and executive council members. This Workforce Development Group, which was due to meet next in February, has already identified inconsistent delivery. Says National Officer Sean Starbuck, a member of the group: "Unfortunately it seems that firefighters working the RDS are again victims of the ad hoc implementation of these processes. Some officials have reported that although there are the same procedures for promotion for both RDS and wholetime firefighters this seems to be ignored with the RDS when 'needs must'. Inconsistency of approach needs to be challenged whenever it raises its head."



New member Mat Riley (second to left, back) with colleagues at Uckfield fire station

East Sussex FBU in recruitment boost

MEET THE NEW MEMBERS

A rep from East Sussex has an enviable record of recruiting new retained firefighters to the FBU. John Haizelden goes to the brigade's two-week introductory training course for retained firefighters and gives an hour-long presentation about the union.

The last course he attended, he left the building having signed up seven out of the nine attendees.

"Sometimes I've walked away with 100% membership," he says. "Going into the course is perfect because not only does it embed in their minds the central role the FBU plays in their workplace but it allows a discussion to take place and gives me the chance to answer any questions and clear up any misconceptions they might have about the union."

John goes into the course on the

second day and talks for 40 minutes, allowing 20 minutes for questions.

"As a rep it's sometimes difficult to get round all the retained stations," he says. "And even if I manage it, people often make excuses saying they're too busy, asking me to leave the paper work on the desk and they'll get back to it. But they never do."

"This gives me the perfect opportunity to introduce them to the FBU and seal the deal in one easy go."

One of the new recruits was Matt Riley from Uckfield, who said: "I'd heard of the FBU but didn't know a lot about them," he says. "When I heard John's presentation it got me thinking about whether or not I'd need help further down the line."

"Obviously you hope you'll be lucky and never need it, but you'd be pretty upset if you did need it, but hadn't joined. After all, it's not a lot of money to pay out every month."

Five firefighters at closed retained duty

HUMBERSIDE



The FBU has resolved the issue of the closure of Sledmere station, Humberside, to the satisfaction of all five retained duty system (RDS) firefighters affected. The Union secured through negotiations with

the brigade's management an offer of wholetime posts for all five.

The FBU fought to keep all three of Humberside's retained stations open and Sledmere was the only one that was closed.

Yorkshire and Humberside retained rep, Rick Arrand said:

Salary scheme gets a cautious welcome

CORNWALL

Retained firefighters in Cornwall are giving a cautious welcome to a trial that sees them earning a flat fee of around £8,000 a year for being on call 84 hours a week.

The new system, introduced in December, is being piloted in three fire stations in the county: Saltash, Camborne and St Mawes.

"It's a bit early to say whether it's a success or not, but we're keeping a close eye on it," says FBU Cornwall retained rep Chris Starkey. "We're telling our members that if they have any problems with the new system they must tell us straight away."

Retained firefighters currently earn retained fees of £2,786, plus an hourly rate of £12.72 and a disturbance fee of £3.65 per shout.

The new system would see them being paid quarter of a wholtime firefighter's wage (around £6,963) plus a £1,323 fee for attending a two-hour drill session every week.

They would not receive any extra money until their 101st shout, when they would receive half the turnout rate for each additional shout on top of the flat fee.

Managers hope the lure of a guaranteed wage will attract new recruits to the service.

One potential flashpoint is that the scheme is only being trialled on those who work 84 hours.

"Not everyone can commit to



Cornish firefighters at work after the Penhallow Hotel fire in Newquay

working 84 hours," says Chris.

"We want it to accommodate more flexible working patterns, but in the meantime we've agreed with management that no-one can be disciplined if they don't take part in the trial."

The National Retained Committee

believes that pay and conditions of retained firefighters should meet the minimums laid down in the Grey Book, the fire service National Conditions of Service which was revised in 2003 with a number of improvements for retained firefighters.

station offered full-time posts after Union campaign

"Following representation by the brigade officials, all five were offered full time firefighter posts. Two of the firefighters chose to take redundancy. The watch manager has transferred to a neighbouring RDS station where he has taken up the post of crew manager. The brigade has also agreed

to provide a pay protection package for five years.

"The remaining two firefighters have taken up the offer of full time positions with Humberside Fire and Rescue Service, and following a brief period of familiarisation training will take up their posts on wholtime

stations. Although the station was eventually lost, it was particularly satisfying to achieve a solution that was acceptable to all members of the crew there."

The FBU campaign in Humberside (right and left) included rallies and demonstrations



Thanks to the efforts of local FBU officials, Mark Walker and other West Midlands retained members have avoided many of the unnecessary barriers in the move to wholetime

'The FBU has been great'

Handyman Mark Walker always dreamed of becoming a firefighter. Earning a living as a maintenance man in pubs and clubs around Sedgley in the late 1980s, Mark got chatting to a friend who worked as a retained firefighter in the West Midlands town. "He told me they were looking to recruit new volunteers, so I applied and a few months later, I joined him," recalls Mark.

He spent 21 happy years at the station ("It's great to be able to help any community, but it's special to help the one you live in," he says), but always hankered after 'transferring' – taking the step from being a retained firefighter to a wholetime one. He has now taken that step, thanks to a helping hand from the FBU.

"The FBU has been great – they've made it a lot easier for me," Mark smiles.

Mark, along with six other retained firefighters from Sedgely, was sacked and later re-instated by West Midlands Fire Service after being falsely accused of gross misconduct.

When, having been cleared, he and five of his colleagues applied to transfer to wholetime, they were told they needed to attend an eight-week course to prove their competence. The FBU successfully challenged this.

"We said we'd been training three hours a week every week, even when we were waiting to be re-instated, and that we'd proved our competency. What more could we do?" asked Mark.

"Luckily, they saw sense and as a result, the transfer has been a lot easier than it might have been. It's all been pretty straightforward. We've all been really pleased by it.

"I'd thought about going full time in the past, but I was enjoying being retained. However, when the situation changed at Sedgely, what with working for myself and the economic situation being as it is, the chance to transfer was

one I couldn't turn down. It's come at just the right time for me and allowed me to fulfil a long-term ambition."

The move was eased through with the help of Chris Downes, the FBU's West Midlands regional secretary, and other union officials who also negotiated a better deal for other transferees to the brigade.

Whilst the Sedgely crew avoided the eight-week course because of their unique circumstances, other retained firefighters are obliged to complete it before their transfer. The union chalked up another victory here, negotiating a deal that sees all attendees receive pay rises to wholetime rates while on the course, and ensuring it is not a 'pass or fail' course, but a simple conversion one.

"That is a real result," Chris says with a grin. "We argued that if retained firefighters were deemed competent by their own brigade, they should be deemed competent by West Midlands too. So far, between 20 and 30 retained firefighters have successfully transferred. They jumped at

the chance because it gives them the opportunity to become a wholetime firefighter, which is an ambition many of them have. We welcome them, and always will, providing they join the FBU and agree to abide by our rules."

The brigade itself welcomed applications from retained members, saying: "We believe recruiting existing firefighters

will help us recruit staff to work the late shift in a timely and effective way."

The FBU has for many years been campaigning to make it easier for retained staff to transfer, arguing the toss with brigades up and down the country. One of the more significant victories was gained six years ago when brigades accepted 'a firefighter is a firefighter' regardless of how they worked.

"Ever since the conclusion of the 2003 pay dispute, expectations among our retained members has been

The union also negotiated a deal that sees all attendees receive pay rises to wholetime rates while on the course, and ensuring that the course is a simple conversion one

Mark Walker at work





PICTURES: ROY PETERS

raised on the issue of transferring,” says National Retained Committee Secretary Pete Preston, pointing out it was much easier for a wholetime firefighter to transfer to a retained position than the other way round.

“When a wholetime firefighter wants to become retained, it often involves little more than an application for consideration,” he says. “But when the reverse happens the process can be much more onerous and some brigades are still flatly refusing to allow any such application for transfer based solely on the firefighter’s duty status.

“Retained firefighters should be treated no less favourably than their wholetime colleagues when wishing to move between duty systems. If a brigade is putting up barriers to such transfers, the first port of call for advice should be to contact your brigade officials.”

More and more retained members are keen to make the switch, says Executive Council member Tam Mitchell, and their requests are being increasingly granted.

“Many brigades are now accepting transfers onto full time duty systems from retained firefighters although there are many differing approaches being adopted,” he says.

“Some are still insisting that the full pre-entry national selection tests are undertaken despite the fact that the tests are not intended for that purpose.

“Other brigades however, have accepted that retained firefighters are indeed no different from other duty system

firefighters and have taken on transfers directly from their retained station to wholetime stations.”

The FBU is pushing for a national protocol to be introduced that would standardise transfer procedure throughout the country because, at present, there are too many idiosyncrasies between brigades.

For example, in the West Midlands, transfers are accepted from the brigade’s own retained firefighters, while those from other brigades have to undergo a course familiarising them with the new equipment, procedures and geography.

Other brigades have different procedures: some insist any retained firefighters wishing to become wholetime can do so only when the brigade is recruiting, others, including Lincolnshire, accept retained firefighters onto wholetime duty systems provided they can demonstrate evidence of competence and pass the required interview stages, and North Wales which automatically fast-tracks retained firefighters to the interview stage.

“The whole system is very confusing,” says Pete Preston. “It would be a lot easier for everyone if the brigades adopted a clear and transparent procedure that rewards the contribution made by retained members by making it as easy as possible to transfer, whether it’s between one brigade and another, or whether it’s within your own brigade. Retained firefighters should also be the same as wholetime when it comes to requesting a transfer.”

The FBU has for many years been campaigning to make it easier for retained staff to transfer, arguing the toss with brigades up and down the country



ESSEX

James Dykes, retained secretary for Essex FBU, says the union's recruitment campaign is notching up successes

I've been a retained firefighter at Wivenhoe in Essex for just over three years now. I joined the FBU on my first day at work not only because I wanted protection for myself, but also because there's strength in unity.

I've been in industries where management have said one thing and done another and the employees have

We've changed from having four geographical divisional reps, to having seven workplace command reps. This means we've spread the workload around more, which makes it easier to attract volunteers

had no protection at all. Being in the union gives you the chance to have support and back-up; you're never fighting your battle on your own.

In mid-November I was elected as the retained secretary for Essex FBU. I put myself forward because I wanted to help my friends and colleagues. This work doesn't get done on its own.

The previous divisional rep, Mick Rogers, was very proactive in

recruiting new members, always telling people about the union, and we wanted to continue his good work. As a result, we're always trying to recruit new members, trying to get new people interested.

It's often the same old people, the same old faces that do the jobs, so we're trying to get some fresh blood in there, some new ideas.

We've been pretty successful, although it's helped our recruitment drive that the RFU has been lazy. They're dying a death in Essex. Our brigade released an interim risk management plan and while Mick Rogers wrote our response, no-one's seen the RFU's response – not even their members.

This has been good for us because, as well as talking up what the FBU is doing, we've been able to ask RFU members what their union's been doing, and the answer's been "Nothing".

We've also been successful in attracting new reps because we've changed from having four geographical divisional reps, to having seven workplace command reps. This means we've spread the workload around more, which makes it easier to attract volunteers. It's only been in action for a few months, but I have no doubt it will work because the FBU is on the rise in Essex!

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